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PEWTER

PEWTER, that homely alloy of tin and lead (antimony, copper, and even iron, as well as other minerals, being found as capricious accidents in its composition at various times and places), played so large and useful a part in both ecclesiastical and domestic furnishings during the centuries of living art that it has rightly found its place among museum collections. That of the Metropolitan Museum has been by no means despicable or unrepresentative, though, owing to the inevitable accident of its housing in a sequestered part of the building,¹ and to lack of space even there, it has not been so well or favorably known as it ought. Besides, there has lately come into the possession of the Museum, through the generous gift of Robert M. Parmelee and Mrs. William L. Parker, in memory of Alice E. Parmelee, a collection² of which it would be hard to overestimate the importance when added to the existing one.

Needless to say, it does not fall within the scope of this article to present even a résumé of the history of pewter in general. That has been done exhaustively and attractively in the *Études sur l'Étain*, by Germain Bapst, and, with more or less

specific application, in such easily accessible books as C. A. Markham's *Pewter Marks and Old Pewter Ware*, H. J. L. J. Massé's *Pewter Plate*, Malcolm Bell's *Old Pewter*, and *Scottish Pewter-Ware and Pewterers* by the late L. Ingleby Wood—as well as a host of other writings in various languages. My purpose here is to call attention to the more characteristic pieces or sections of the Museum store, taking up first the collection as previously exhibited and second the valuable gift just received.

For those ordinarily unfamiliar with the history of pewter it seems right to premise one or two warnings. 1st. Really old pieces of pewter are rare. Little will customarily be found antedating the sixteenth century and of that century no great amount.

2nd. It is not commonly possible to speak of the provenance of pewter vessels, or the craftsman's name or mark, with the certainty and confidence that one can of those belonging to the gold- or silversmith's craft.

The reasons are obvious. The easy destructibility and convertibility of pewter, whether by breakage or fire, exposed it to permutations and transformations unknown to the precious metals; while its comparatively vile esteem caused it to be less zealously guarded. Its very nature as an alloy and the number of its rivals in the purposes for which it was commonly employed, gave it a less stable character, and made it a more difficult thing to enact and enforce statutes regarding its production and sale than in the case of those same precious

¹Since the above was written, the whole collection of pewter has been rearranged and properly shown in Gallery 23, on the second floor of the main building.

²This will be shown with the rest of the pewter in Gallery 23.

metals—even during the prevalence of the jealous and efficient guild-system of the artistic ages.

One other premise let me assume, that, mindful of the nature and limitations of our metal, the true lover of pewter will look to find its best achievements in pieces and times when these have been frankly recognized by the craftsman, not when it has been forced to compete with its aristocratic kinsmen, silver and gold. Men and metals always appear to best advantage in their own sphere—their efficiency is most evident so. David, the shepherd-lad, could kill Goliath with his shepherd's sling and stone; he would have been helpless in the armor Saul unwisely wished to thrust upon him. The gallant Locksley easily vanquished all the foresters of Charnwood and Needwood Chases, as well as of his own Sherwood Forest, with his English yeoman's weapon of bow and cloth-yard shaft. He would probably have fallen in the first encounter with the ignoble Philip de Malvoisin had he entered in knightly panoply the lists of Ashby-de-la-Zouche.

Yet I have spoken of pewter as actual "kinsman" (of like "kin" or "kind") with gold and silver. And it is so, not only *qua* metal, but by brevet of Holy Church; for the Catholic Church, with her unerring instinct for what is clean and wholesome and "sanitary," decreed these three metals—gold, silver, and pewter (or "tin," the terms being synonymous, as in French and German to this day—*étain*, *zinn*) "pure metals," i. e., such as immunity from rust and from poisonous corrosion, as well

as durability and ease of cleaning, rendered fit for use in the sacrificial vessels and other necessary furniture of her altars. Naturally these vessels should be the best and costliest obtainable, and preference was given to those metals universally esteemed "precious"; but where poverty or charity (e. g., when the church plate had been melted to provide ransom for Christian captives) debarred their use, pewter was universally regarded as a lawful substitute.

There was another ecclesiastical use of pewter, to which gold and silver were seldom put; namely, to furnish the chalice and paten which were commonly buried with priests as insignia of their office.

For examples of any of these vessels, either sacrificial or funereal, we should look in vain in the Museum collection. Very few exist in the world, ecclesiastical plate being notoriously the first object of pillage and rapine, and pewter being, if not the most coveted, the easiest destroyed. It may not be amiss perhaps to record that from such ex-

amples as do exist we know that the craftsmen, with the infallible instinct and noble restraint which marked their time, made such vessels always of the simplest form, relying wholly on purity of line and justness of proportion for all adornment, except such sacred symbols or peculiarities of construction as were deemed essential to mark their proper use. In no instance did they lavish on them that fertility of invention and wealth of ornament which they did on their gold and silver counterparts.

In the department of ecclesiastical pewter, the earliest and most characteristic



TEA-KETTLE (?), FLEMISH
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

things in the Museum are probably two pairs of altar-candlesticks, respectively French and Flemish of the early eighteenth century. There is also the small portable cistern or lavabo—made either to stand on a shelf or be hung from a clamp on the wall—at which the priest ceremonially washed his hands in the sacristy, before proceeding to vest for the Holy Sacrifice. This is probably German of the eighteenth century.

Of objects of a distinctively religious or devotional use there is an array of small private holy-water stoups or bénitiers, all undoubtedly French or Flemish and ranging from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century.

Then there is a very fine baptismal basin or laver—German, late sixteenth-century work—evidently the gift of a pious Lutheran woman, Anna Maria Grubendör, and meant (as so many corresponding but less ornate vessels in Scotland) to supply the place of the ancient fonts, which were so frequently broken or cracked by the early reformers in their anti-papistical zeal. The form of this is peculiar and characteristic; it is ornamented with a well-executed engraving of Christ's baptism in the Jordan, and with a text (Mark xvi, 16) from Luther's Bible.

There is also a small goblet-shaped cup (No. 14.91.6) of admirable design and proportions, but absolutely undecorated, which may possibly have served as a communion-cup in the Scottish Episcopal Church. At least, almost precisely similar ones exist, traditionally asserted to have served that purpose in the troubled days of that heroic community during the tempestuous years

which followed the Whig Revolution of 1688.

Then there are three large "Seder" or Passover dishes, used by the Orthodox Jews in the celebration of the touching and picturesque ceremonies of that most ancient of existing festivals. These are all German of the eighteenth century and the already florid ornament of the period has been supplemented by a redundancy of presumably pious designs by later and less

skilful hands. That of the rebel prince, Absalom, hanging in the oak by his hair and being thrust through with a dart by Joab is obvious enough (if the application to the festival is not); but others are not so intelligible. One design they all have in common, characteristic of the period—a flamboyant heraldic achievement, in each case with the same motive, some sacred symbol (in two cases Hebrew characters—the Divine Name, Jehovah?—and in the third a bull on the disk of the sun) ensigned with Crown Royal, and upheld by royal supporters—"Lions of the Tribe of Judah"

perhaps. Despite their undoubted interest as they are, artistically one can but regret that objects so dignified by their size and use were not left with their original formal ornament and Hebrew inscriptions, the latter in themselves decorative enough.

Of purely domestic objects, out of many one can speak particularly of but few. There are armies of plates, English, Dutch, French, and German, of the usual types, chiefly of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, great circular platters of resonant metal, bearing abundant marks of use, but with little other ornament than their



FLAGON, GERMAN
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

perfect adaptation to their use—their graceful curves, broad flat margins, helpfully placed mouldings, and perfect concord of parts. We seem to see them heaped with the generous viands of the workers, fighters, and revelers of simpler ages than our own—valiant trenchermen all! Then there are others—Dutch principally—less austere in design, meant for the art-loving burghers who were painted by Rembrandt and Frans Hals, and who rejoiced in the



TOBACCO BOX, ENGLISH
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

flower and fruit pieces of Ruysch and Huysmans. No. 06.769, with a representation of the Hebrew spies returning with the sample of the grapes of Eshcol, and Nos. 06.744 and 780 are all good examples of this fine, bold work, admirably adapted to our material—pewter.

No. 06.849 is a charmingly naïve English design of a "peacock in his pride" perched on a flowering shrub, probably of the early eighteenth century. Then there are arrays of German plates from different parts of the ancient Empire—some in bold and fine relief, others variously engraved, very frequently with their favorite heraldic

designs, arms of prince-bishops, archdukes, grafs, and markgrafs, and all the feudal chivalry of that bizarre assemblage of states, the once august Holy Roman Empire. In this section we must not forget those much-prized, but utterly useless show-pieces—the "Kaiser-tellers" and "Noe-tellers," Nuremberg toys of the most ambitious design and intricate pattern, but quite out of character in pewter—really the crown of the decadence of the art.

Lastly, in this enumeration of "sadware" (i. e. flat, as opposed to rounded and hollow pieces) there are several of the beautiful French plates and dishes of the early eighteenth century which only admirable purity and quality of metal and exquisite French taste in design and ornament redeem from the Nuremberg reproach. Such are the oval dish, No. 06.782; the pair of fruit dishes, Nos. 06.770 a.b.; and the plates, Nos. 06.839, 802, 768. These also acquire an added interest from the fact that they probably owe their obvious distinction and very evident rivalry of silver plate to the decree of Louis XIV, who, finding himself toward the end of his reign and his long struggle to maintain France at the head of the nations and of civilization, beaten and impoverished, confiscated all the gold and silver plate of his nobles to the use of the state, bidding them content themselves with pewter—to their no small indignation and discontent, so feelingly expressed by the great apologist of dukes, Saint-Simon.

Of domestic pieces "in round," which form, after all, the main attraction of the collection, one first notices two more of those portable cisterns of lavatories, similar to the ecclesiastical one referred to above; these to be set on a sideboard or bracket, or capable of being attached to a wall, and a third one, still larger, necessarily so fixed, in form of a headlong dolphin, obligingly emitting his native fluid.

Another vessel for pouring liquor, but assuredly not water, and for interior not exterior application, is that curious standing figure of a beef-ox, once no doubt a prized table-piece of a butchers' guild in some sixteenth-century German town, and

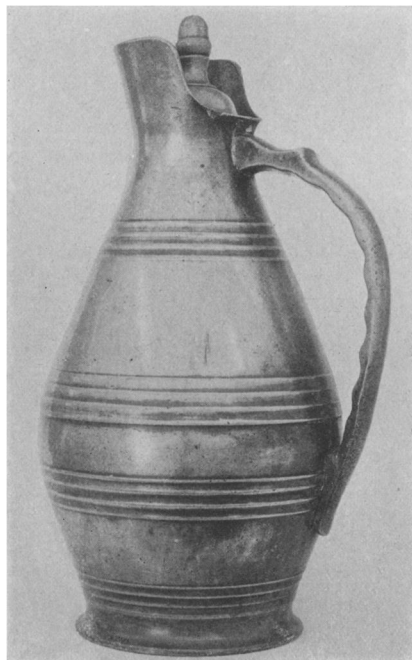
having engraved on its sides the names of forgotten Master-Fleshers of the Guild.

Then there is a very fair array of those problematical vessels which, for lack of a more authentic designation, cataloguers seem agreed to call "food-bottles." Far more probably they were air-tight canisters for drugs—poppy-heads, senna leaves, tamarinds, tonka beans, ginger and orris root, galbanum, tears of balm, clots of gum-benzoin, and all the thousand and one intriguing constituents of the vegetable pharmacopoeia of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; or for the now more prosaic but then rarer and more esteemed herb of China, bean of Arabia, or the but recently discovered crystals of sugar-of-cane. But guessing, though alluring, is profitless. One guess is as good as another. Portable they certainly were meant to be, as the worn rings atop attest; but one side never seems to be more worn than the rest, which would almost inevitably be the case if they were really the precursors of the Fall-River and political-orator's dinner-pail. They pass by insensible degrees into veritable flasks or bottles—perhaps actual canteens, intended for spirits, cordials, "strong-waters," and to be carried afield by soldier or wayfarer against possible need. Still the same rectangular pattern, though appressed, and still the same screw-top and portable ring. One of the latter type (No. 06.840) suggests more than the generic questionings, for whereas the others are all inevitably Dutch or German, this, which shows a very Coptic Saint George spearing his dragon, and niched eicons of a royal or imperial personage, with soldiers to match, bears also inscriptions in Syriac, or some other Levantine tongue, and drags the question of its provenance into new fields—where I lack courage to follow.

Of other oddities, or less conventional pieces of the collection, there are two engraved plaques (for lack of a better term)—one, heart- or "heater"-shaped; one, of the fantastic seventeenth-century shield shape—each engraved with symbols and inscriptions on both sides. They are both examples of guild-badges of the seventeenth century; one (No. 06.743) of the Yarn-

Weavers of Zehden in Brandenburg, the other of a butchers' guild, but where, "deponent sayeth not."

There is also a single, but late, example of that now almost forgotten implement—a barber's basin; this but a small one, and probably intended for a private dressing-room—a degenerate collateral of the ample one of gleaming copper which beguiled the heroic Don into thinking he had found "Mambrino's Helmet!"



CIDER JUG, NORMAN
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

There are the inevitable troops of tankards and flagons and liquid measures and battalia of porringers and cupping- and bleeding-dishes, of posset-dishes and beakers and goblets. There are urns and teapots and coffee and chocolate pots. There are salt-boxes and cellars—"master" and "trencher" and nondescript. There are cruets and casters and sprinklers for all customary condiments. There is a rare good specimen of that curious German device, a time-keeping lamp; and there is a striking brace of candelabra—German,

too, of the sixteenth century, each of a varlet in the dress of the period, supporting in each hand a flambeau of two lights—as old and as noticeable as anything in the collection.

The gift of Mr. Parmelee and Mrs. Parker not only supplies many lacunae in the existing collection already discussed, but also furnishes particularly admirable examples of classes previously represented.

Among the latter is a "food-bottle" of an absolutely different type—cylindrical in-



SALVER, SWISS
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

stead of angular; and a truly magnificent array of those great buckler-like, well-used dishes and platters, which are the joy and pride of the true pewter-lover, and to which I have referred above. Also under this head one might quote a delightful German flagon, the body a diminishing cylinder of spiral fluting, with the characteristic German grotesque porcine-piscine lip and globular purchase.

There is, too, a most pleasing salver, suggesting French work at its best, but this is Swiss, with well-known Swiss "touches," as the makers' stamps on pewter are called, and doubtless of the eighteenth century. It is pentagonal, rose-shaped in outline, with delicate

moulded margin and engraved surface, and in the center the "accosted" arms of the cantons of Geneva and Berne.

Of pieces quite unique in the collection one inevitably notices a splendid tall "cider jug" which one feels sure (in default of any guiding "marks") is Norman of the type represented by Mr. Bell in his *Old Pewter* (pl. cii, p. 140), only finer. Also a tobacco box, which assuredly is that (or a fellow to it) figured in Mr. Massé's *Pewter Plate*, p. 117, and which one is equally convinced is English of the late Georgian period, when Pistrucci as Mint-Master was coining guineas and Wedgwood designing his jasper-ware. Then there are those delightful—but quite theoretically wrong—painted candlesticks! All one's pewter convictions revolt at the thought of painting it—robbing it of its own peculiar glory, its sheen; but these, with their graceful, simple outlines and harmony of autumnal russet and gold, and charming Dutch cottages of the landscapes of Ruysdael and Hobbema, disarm our scorn with their quiet beauty. One more piece seems to claim notice, because it perplexes as well as pleases one. Very evidently it is a tea-kettle, with curious grotesque bosses of lions' or bears' heads as sockets for handle-ends and spout, the latter a short, rigid nozzle, seemingly designed to spirt the scalding water over anyone attempting to use it. It has a slender, wrought-iron swing-handle of rectangular outline; but no sign of any other—vertical or otherwise—by which the kettle might be inclined to make it pour! One would almost be tempted to suspect the nozzle of being a whistle, like that of the peanut merchant, and the whole thing an ingenious musical instrument—perhaps to sound a summons to tea! Mr. Bell again seems to figure either this actual vessel, or one precisely like it in *Pl. lxxxix*, p. 124, of his above-quoted work; but he calls it a "teapot"! Unmoved, I still think it a "kettle"; but how it fulfilled either function without the tipping handle, remains for me "no small marvel but a great one," as Herodotus was wont to chronicle of his wonders.

R. T. N.